

SQUARE ROOTS

Contemporary design and minimalist planting have transformed this tiny urban courtyard into a sculptural work of living art



DESIGNER PROFILE Matt Keightley is an award-winning designer. He runs Rosebank Landscaping with business partner and close friend Cameron Wilson. Matt won the People's Choice award at RHS Chelsea Flower Show in both 2014 and 2015, and three of his designs have been shortlisted for the 2017 Society of Garden Designers Awards, including this beautiful courtyard garden in southwest London.

What was the brief for this garden?

The garden belongs to a couple with school-age children who were past the swings and slides stage. Their house is in a quiet mews, and while the exterior looks traditional, the interior is very contemporary. You can also see the garden when you walk through the front door. The owners wanted a design that would match the style of the modern kitchen and family room, which lead to the outdoor space. The look of the garden was particularly important to them, but the practical addition of the stylish seating area has proved very popular.

Tell us about your design solution.

This northeast-facing garden is small and shady so, to achieve the stylish design the owners were looking for, I went for a simple, contemporary look and muted colours. The design is based on a template of squares and rectangles, with columns of clipped yew set into a sea of gravel, and a stone terrace and bridge walkway on the left, leading to a deck at the back. Bespoke aluminium seats were made to fit the space, and horizontal wooden cladding on the back wall and the right-hand boundary help to give the illusion that the garden is wider than it actually is. An artificial green wall injects colour and rich texture into the area immediately by the house, while three hornbeam trees provide height and seasonal interest.

How did you choose the sculptural elements?

The owners' house is full of contemporary paintings and I wanted to reflect their love of art in the garden. I remembered that Mary Bourne, a Scottish artist I had used for the sculptures in my 2014 RHS Chelsea garden, had images of trees on her website that would suit this design perfectly. Mary has used platinum leaf to represent bark in these panels and this glows as the garden lights come on, mirroring the illuminated trunks of the real trees. The effect is striking. I also had a number of pieces of granite cut in a colour to match the kitchen cabinets, and I fixed these onto the artificial green wall to echo the interior design and provide additional interest.

What inspired your planting choices?

The look had to be simple for this clean design, and the amount of shade limited my choices. I have used yew topiary because it is very reliable and the colour sings out against the grey walls. The hornbeams



are excellent trees and I like the fact that, although they are deciduous, they retain a few bronzed leaves in winter. The only other living plants are *Asplenium scolopendrium* (hart's tongue fern), tucked under the seating at the back to disguise the framework of the furniture and make the seats look as though they are afloat in a sea of green.

Why did you choose artificial plants for the green wall?

The main reason we used them was because the wall was too shady to grow real plants; they would have stretched towards the natural light and the pattern of the planting would have disappeared within two seasons. We used a specialist supplier called VistaGreen, and most people have no idea that the plants are not real, even when

they are right beside them. We also used preserved moss in the containers on the shelf behind the seating.

What tips do you have for commissioning bespoke furniture?

Made-to-measure furniture is great if you are working with a small garden like this one, which is not quite square. I designed the aluminium seating to fit perfectly into the space at the back, and its contemporary styling makes a statement feature. However, bespoke furniture is not cheap, so you need to get it right and make sure it is comfortable. We built a plywood prototype to ensure the seat would fit, which also gave the owners the chance to test it for comfort and approve the final design.

KEY PLANTS

Carpinus betulus
(common hornbeam)
Taxus baccata (English yew)
Asplenium scolopendrium
(hart's tongue fern)

PLANT SUPPLIERS

Majestic Trees

01582 843981
majestictrees.co.uk

The Plant Centre Hortus Loci

0138 932 6467
hplantcentre.co.uk

Paramount Plants

020 8367 8809
paramountplants.co.uk

LANDSCAPE SUPPLIERS

The paving is Italian granite from London Stone, 02753 212950, londonstone.co.uk, and the composite decking is Trekker Anthracite from Havwoods International, 01524 737000, havwoods.co.uk. The walls are clad in treated softwood from Champion timber, 020 8949 1621, championtimber.com, and painted with an ebony stain called Charcoal, from ATC, 01600 713036, atcshoponline.co.uk. The concrete-clad walls and floating plates are made from a through-colour render, matched to any shade at JUB, 0845 688 9866, jubrenders.co.uk. The aluminium furniture and shelves were designed and commissioned by Matt Keightley, and the lighting fixtures are from Collingwood Lighting, 01604 495151, collingwoodlighting.com. The artificial green wall is by VistaGreen, 020 7385 1020, vistagreen.com, and the wall art is by Mary Bourne, marybourne.co.uk.

GARDEN DESIGN

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LIGHTING A GARDEN

- 'LED lights are the best choice for gardens,' says Matt, 'as they don't give out any heat, are inexpensive to run and can be controlled remotely.'
- Hide fittings under paving, artworks and beneath seats to create an eye-catching floating effect.
- You can also use spotlights very effectively at the base of trees to light up their trunks.
- Install different circuits for each focal point, so you can choose to illuminate individual features, such as trees or paving.